

# Identifying Instructional Moves During Guided Learning

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Expert teachers use a four-part process to scaffold student understanding during small-group guided instruction.

**"D**oes it sound right?" "Does it make sense?" "Look at the picture and then the word." These are familiar scaffolds that reading teachers use to help students make sense of the text. This type of interaction ensures that students develop the cognitive and metacognitive processes necessary to learn to read and read to learn, but putting these scaffolds into place is a challenge. Saying or doing the just-right thing so that students do the cognitive work is a critical aspect of teaching reading and writing.

Scaffolds require an interaction between a more knowledgeable other and a learner. Most educators today trace this idea to Vygotsky (1978) who introduced the world to the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which "awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment" (p. 90). Vygotsky believed that learners operate on two levels: the "actual developmental level" and the "potential developmental level." The ZPD, then, is "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86).

Vygotsky did not use the terms *scaffold* or *scaffolding*. The term *scaffold* as applied to learning situations comes from Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976), who defined it as a process "that enables a child or novice to solve a task or achieve a goal that would

be beyond his unassisted efforts" (p. 90). Most of the early work on ZPD and instructional scaffolds was done with individual students, not small or large groups of them. Wood and Wood (1996) noted that Vygotsky's definition leaves teachers with the task of figuring out "the nature of the guidance and the collaboration that promotes development" (p. 5).

The gradual release of responsibility model, a framework for implementing instructional scaffolds in reading comprehension, provides a structure for the teacher to move from assuming "all the responsibility for performing a task...to a situation in which the students assume all the responsibility" (Duke & Pearson, 2002, pp. 210–211) using teacher modeling, shared tasks between teachers and students, and independent practice and application by the learner. As part of the gradual release of responsibility framework, the teacher scaffolds learning to facilitate student understanding.

## Instructional Scaffolds

Attempts to clarify the scaffolds that a teacher can and should use have been the focus of a great deal of research. For example, while discussing the research of Rodgers (2004), Rogoff suggested that "adults support children's learning by structuring the task's difficulty level, jointly participating in problem solving, focusing the learner's attention to the task, and motivating the learner" (p. 504). Maloch (2002) identified specific scaffolds useful in guiding students, including "direct and indirect elicitations, modeling, highlighting of strategies, and reconstructive recaps" (p. 108). Interesting, her study suggested that reconstructive recaps, in which the adult highlights the success of the student with the goal of encouraging the student to engage in that behavior or skill

again, was one more scaffold that adults can use to facilitate student understanding.

A major goal of the guided instruction phase in the gradual release of responsibility model is to create an environment for students where they can begin to apply what they are learning (Fisher & Frey, 2008). Mastery is not an expectation; the teacher is there to provide scaffolds to support and guide learners, then get out of the way to observe what they do with the scaffolds. The teacher is also continuously assessing the extent to which instruction has “stuck” and whether further instruction is needed.

All of this adds up to a complex series of instructional decisions that must occur quickly. It requires the teacher to draw on curricular and developmental knowledge to apply scaffolds that guide, not simply tell. Given the rapidity with which all of this must occur, the purpose of this study was to closely observe the ways that teachers checked for understanding and the types of prompts and cues offered during small-group guided instruction. Specifically, we wanted to identify the specific scaffolds that teachers use to guide student learning.

## Methodology

At the time of this study, the urban district we selected for investigation employed over 1,400 elementary teachers. We asked the district leadership to identify teachers for participation in this study based on demonstrated success in student achievement. Over 250 teachers were identified whose students regularly performed at high levels on formal assessment measures. From this list of 250 teachers, we asked for 18 classrooms in which at least 50% of the students qualified for free lunch and where at least 35% of the students were English learners. We were not looking for the best teachers but rather examples of teachers who regularly got good results while teaching a diverse group of students. Table 1 contains information

### PAUSE AND PONDER

- Why is it important to ask a range of robust questions (e.g., divergent, inventive, heuristic) during guided instruction?
- What misconceptions and partial understandings do you commonly discover with your students? How do you repair these?
- Novice teachers sometimes focus on the physical arrangement of guided instruction (i.e., tables, books, number of students) at the expense of the cognitive purposes. Why do you think this is so?
- What cues (e.g., verbal, visual, positional, gestural) do you find to be most useful during this phase of instruction?
- In what ways can a reading coach support teachers in developing guided instruction?

about the demographics of the participants.

We scheduled 67 observations over a nine-week period, with each teacher being observed at least three times. We collected data about the specific interactions that teachers had with their students as part of their small-group guided instruction. We digitally recorded the instruction and took extensive field notes to capture information on nonverbal communication and instructional materials. The district had adopted a basal reading series, which was used mainly for whole-class instruction. Teachers were encouraged to use leveled books and trade books for guided instruction, and students regularly read outside of school from books they chose to read. The district administration identified this structure as their balanced literacy curriculum based on a gradual release of responsibility model and was clear that small-group guided instruction was an expectation of the literacy block.

At the end of the observation period, each author independently coded the transcripts, identifying specific instructional moves that the teachers used to guide student understanding. Using a constant-comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 2002), we categorized our observations and identified themes. The categories emerged as we coded each transcript. When we disagreed on the code for a specific teacher move, we negotiated and clarified our understanding. If we could not reach agreement, we set the interaction aside for later review—almost 5% of the sample. We also held two member checks to validate or question our assumptions and understandings (Creswell, 1997). During these conversations, we shared our thinking about the scaffolds that we had observed and proposed our organizational system for using scaffolds during guided instruction. The member checks were attended by purposefully selected informants, including three teachers, a peer coach, and two administrators, who we trusted to provide knowledgeable feedback.

**Table 1**  
**Demographics of Teachers Who Participated**  
**in This Study**

Grade	Gender	Years teaching	Number of students during period studied
K	Female	4	20
K	Female	18	19
K	Female	11	20
1	Female	6	20
1	Female	28	20
1	Female	9	20
2	Male	5	20
2	Female	7	19
2	Female	9	20
3	Female	25	19
3	Female	7	20
3	Female	3	20
4	Male	17	31
4	Female	13	30
5	Female	9	30
5	Male	7	30
6	Female	8	32
6	Female	19	31

## Findings

The analysis of the observation data revealed four distinct teacher moves as they scaffolded student understanding, including using questions to check for understanding, prompting cognitive and metacognitive work, cues to focus the learner's attention, and direct explanations or modeling when the learner continued to struggle. As we observed the instruction, a pattern began to emerge. The teachers regularly checked for understanding as part of their guided instruction. When the question revealed a misunderstanding, misconception, overgeneralization, or oversimplification, the teacher would prompt and/or cue the learner. When prompts or cues failed to resolve the problem, the teacher moved to direct explanation. We have summarized the process in graphic form in Figure 1. Of course, in real time, these instructional moves are rapid and overlapping. Also, sometimes teachers paired their moves, such as

when prompting the student while also providing a gestural cue or questioning to check for understanding while also pausing to prompt metacognitive work.

The member check confirmed the process that many of the teachers had internalized. As one of the participants noted, "I didn't have the right words for it before, but that's exactly what I do. I guide my students along and provide help, but not too much, to make sure they have a successful learning experience with me." Another person at the member check meeting noted, "These are good definitions that will help me think about my practice. I never knew if I should say prompt or cue or support or scaffold." We recognized in this comment and others like it that there are no common definitions for the terms that educators use to discuss scaffolds. As we observed the teachers in this study, we agreed on terms that described the actions we saw. We were comfortable with using the names for these teacher moves, as there is no consensus on what the terms mean.

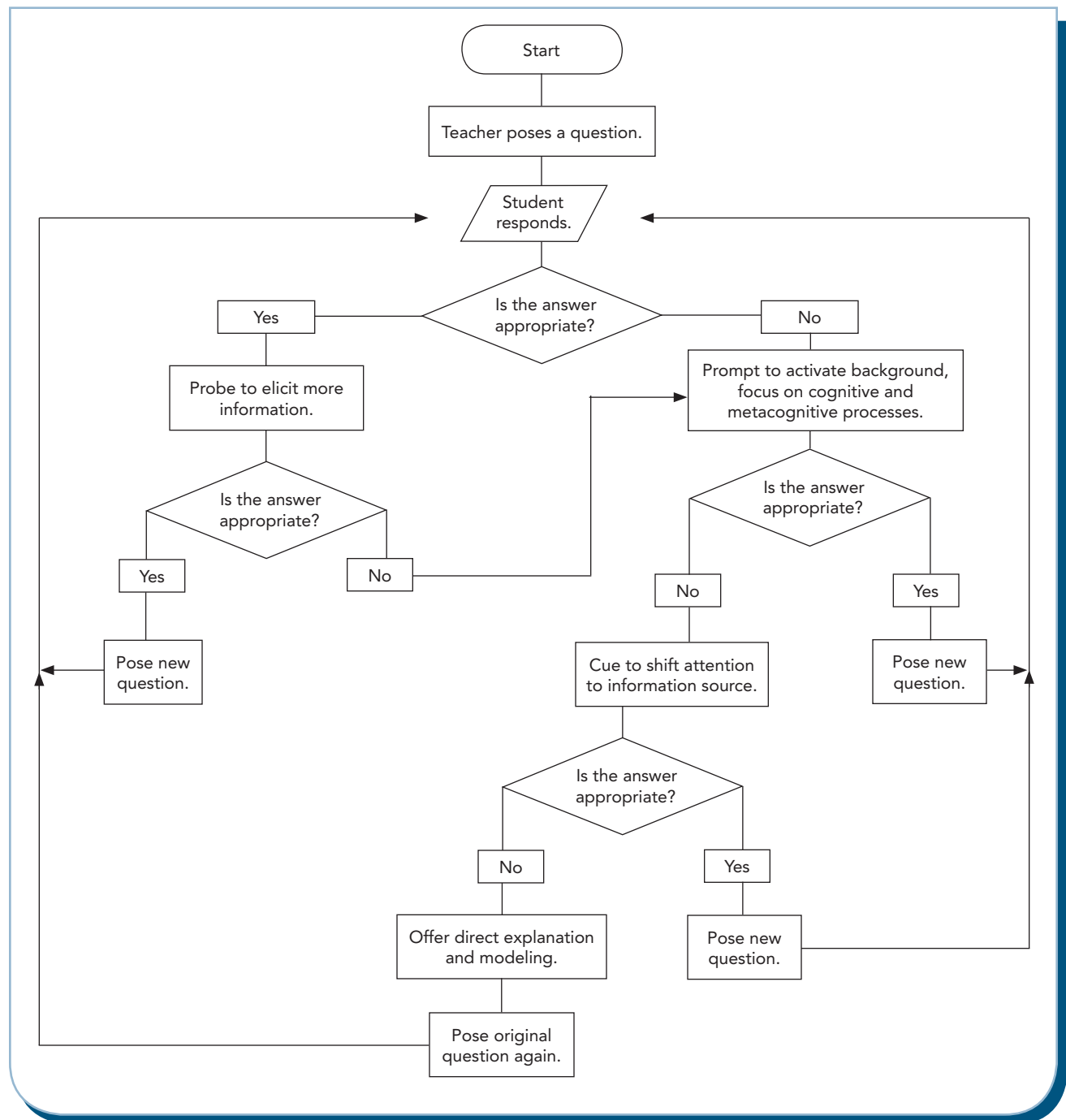
## Questioning to Check for Understanding

Posing questions to check for understanding is an essential move during guided instruction. Questions that check for understanding are intended to assist the teacher in determining the extent to which previous instruction has stuck. The intention of the question is an important one, as the existence of a punctuation mark alone does not qualify it for this category. In some cases, questions are used to lead a learner and are more accurately described as prompts. A question posed to check for understanding yields a response that alerts the teacher about what a student knows and does not know at that moment in time. Questions to probe are necessarily robust and designed to work within a purposeful framework that moves beyond the initiation-response-evaluation cycle described by Cazden (2001).

We have categorized questions that check for understanding in six major categories: elicit information, foster elaboration or clarification, require the learner to link divergent information, involve problem-solving heuristics, and trigger inventive responses (see Table 2).

**Elicitation Questions.** These were the most frequently asked questions when checking for understanding and were often coupled with other queries.

**Figure 1**  
**Instructional Decision-Making Tree**



Elicitation questions invite the learner to offer information using concepts or skills that have been previously taught. This type of question was often phrased using familiar question words: *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why*, and *how*. The focus was often on concrete facts, as when a second-grade teacher pointed

to a sentence strip and asked, “What is the verb in this sentence?”

In other cases, the elicitation was used to unearth a misconception. In a different second-grade classroom, the teacher suspected that the child was not cross-monitoring text and illustration, so she asked,

**Table 2**  
**Types of Questions to Determine Student Knowledge**

Question type	Purpose	Examples
Elicitation	To unearth misconceptions and check for factual knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Who...?</li> <li>■ What...?</li> <li>■ When...?</li> <li>■ Where...?</li> <li>■ Why...?</li> <li>■ How...?</li> </ul>
Elaboration	To extend the length and complexity of the response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Can you tell me more about that?</li> <li>■ What other information do I need to know?</li> </ul>
Clarification	To gain further details	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Can you show me where you found that information?</li> <li>■ Why did you choose that answer?</li> </ul>
Divergent	To discover how the student uses existing knowledge to formulate new understandings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Why does water look blue in a lake but clear in a glass?</li> <li>■ Do butterflies and moths have anything in common?</li> </ul>
Heuristic	To determine the learner's ability to problem solve	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Would you use word parts or context clues to figure out the meaning of this word?</li> <li>■ If I were looking for information about spring in this book, where could I look?</li> <li>■ How do you know when you have run out of ways to answer this question?</li> </ul>
Inventive	To stimulate imaginative thought	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ If you could, what advice would you have given to George Washington during the winter at Valley Forge?</li> <li>■ Who would you recommend this book to?</li> </ul>

"How do the pictures help you understand the story?" Difficulty with an elicitation question usually triggered further prompting, cueing, or in some cases, direct explanation and modeling on the part of the teacher.

**Elaboration Questions.** These questions often followed an initial elicitation, so the teacher could further probe student understanding. These questions were intended to increase the length of the response, as when a first-grade teacher solicited a fuller response from a student by asking, "Can you tell me more about that?" In other cases, elaboration questions provided students an opportunity to demonstrate deeper understanding, as in the example of a third-grade teacher who asked a student to show where she found the information and why it supported her answer.

**Clarification Questions.** As with elaboration questions, these were frequently paired with initial elicitation questions and were intended to further

expose the student's knowledge of the content. For instance, a sixth-grade teacher was discussing a student's draft of a response to a literature essay on the book *Passage to Freedom* (Mochizuki, 1997). The student had described the protagonist as "brave and fearless," but had not provided evidence from the text. "What evidence do you have of that trait?" her teacher asked. The student referred back to the text to explain two incidences that supported the claim. In a second-grade classroom, the teacher asked a student to clarify his understanding of a word meaning by saying, "You read the word *mighty*. Tell me about that word."

**Divergent Questions.** Although asked less frequently than elicitation, elaboration, and clarification questions, divergent questions nonetheless proved to be among the more thought provoking of questions asked by teachers during the study, as evidenced by students' longer answers (mean = 35 words) compared with the length of responses to other types of questions (mean = 12). Divergent questions require



the learner to consolidate concepts about two topics to create a new relationship. The teacher's intent in this case is to discover how the student uses existing knowledge to formulate a new understanding.

When a kindergarten teacher asked a student to transform the word *hat* to *cat*, *cats*, *mats*, *rats*, and then *rat* using magnetic letters, the teacher was posing a series of divergent questions that required the student to use letter knowledge to make new words. A third-grade teacher posed this divergent question to his social studies student, who was closely examining a map of the state of California: "Why might the Sierra Nevada mountain range be called 'the backbone of the state'?" The student had to use the map illustration and his background knowledge about the word *backbone* to formulate an answer.

The students in a fourth-grade guided reading group were reading *The Hundred Dresses* (Estes, 1944/1974) when the teacher posed this divergent question: "Julio, right now in the story, Maddie's feeling badly about teasing Wanda. Why would Maddie feel that way, and what do you predict she'll do about it?" The students had to use their understanding of the text thus far, as well as their personal experiences about being teased and teasing others, to formulate a response to this divergent question.

**Heuristic Questions.** Sometimes the focus of the question was on a student's ability to formulate an informal problem-solving technique. This heuristic, also described as a rule of thumb, is a technique used to support the learner as he or she addresses a problem. A heuristic for reading editorials is to look at the source of the letter or article.

In a fifth-grade classroom examining propaganda, the teacher shared two letters to the editor on the subject of school uniforms. After the students read each letter, she asked them about ways they could understand the text more closely. "Are there techniques you use to make a judgment about these letters?" she asked. Several students commented on the importance of noting who the letter writers were (one was the president of a school uniform company), thus getting these learners to utilize the heuristic of sourcing documents to contextualize them.

**Inventive Questions.** These questions invite students to use what they have learned to speculate or create. When we ask a student to make a book recommendation to another student, we are asking him

or her an inventive question that requires speculation on what he or she knows about both the book and the type of reader who might like it. A third-grade teacher asked a student to list items that would be vital for an astronaut journeying to Mars. The learner had to take into account what she knew about the planet and its conditions, as well as the needs of a human venturing to this hostile landscape.

## Prompting Cognitive and Metacognitive Work

During a guided instruction exchange, the teacher makes an initial inquiry to check for understanding and may ask further questions to cause the student to extend, elaborate, or clarify. However, in many cases, the student is unable to respond correctly or the response may demonstrate partial knowledge. This should be expected within guided instruction, as a major purpose is to gauge the extent to which learning has occurred and make further suppositions about what needs to be taught next.

In many cases, a student response that demonstrates partial understanding requires an additional scaffold to evoke evidence of learning. Prompts are statements that assist the student in focusing on the cognitive or metacognitive processes needed to complete the task. Unlike questions to check for understanding, prompts are intended to get the student to do the thinking needed to achieve a new level of understanding. The prompting samples we collected during our observations fell into four broad categories: (1) background knowledge, (2) process or procedural knowledge, (3) models, templates, or frames, and (4) reflective knowledge.

**Prompting for Background Knowledge.** Much attention in the field has been given to the importance of background knowledge and its use in acquiring new knowledge. Our own experiences as teachers have shown us that students will often possess the requisite background information about a topic and yet fail to activate it strategically. The "Oh, yeah!" from the student that comes after a reminder of something they already know reminds us of the importance of timing in delivering a background knowledge prompt. We witnessed many examples of well-timed background information prompts used during guided instruction.

During a reading of the novel *Esperanza Rising* (Ryan, 2000), a fifth-grade teacher asked about the use of symbolism. The students in his literature circle had read the latest chapter but were having difficulty relating the events to a previously taught symbol in the story. “I’m going to remind you about how important the blanket is her *abuelita* is making,” he remarked. “That zigzag pattern is important.” One student responded, “Yeah, yeah, it’s like ups and downs and ups and downs.” The teacher encouraged him to make the connection to a new event in the chapter: “Right! Now use that! How does that zigzag relate to what just happened to Esperanza?” The student then replied, “It’s a bad time, because she got called Cinderella for doing such a bad job sweeping up the onion skins off the floor. She was used to being treated like a princess or something, and now things are just going straight downhill for her.” As he said this, he tilted his arm in a downward slant. The strategic use of a background knowledge prompt by the teacher helped this learner reach a deeper understanding of the text.

### Prompting for Process or Procedural Knowledge.

At times, a student may be able to achieve a more complete understanding with the assistance of process or procedural knowledge. This is the “how” aspect of learning that students use to complete a

myriad of tasks throughout the academic day (Paris, Cross, & Lipson, 1984). For instance, a third-grade teacher used a checklist to prompt students who were writing a procedural manual for completing a task of their choice. Students were working with partners to compose manuals for how to make a grilled cheese sandwich, ride a skateboard, or tie shoelaces.

Two students had drafted a procedural manual on how to play the game Twister. They met with the teacher to share their draft, and she asked them to take out the writing checklist for the project (see Figure 2). As the teacher read the students’ draft, she referred them to the checklist, requiring them to compare what they had written to the procedural list she had developed for them to utilize.

### Prompting Using Models, Templates, and Frames.

Some prompts asked students to construct knowledge using a framework developed for them. Examples of this include using mentor texts and author studies to understand and emulate the styles of other writers (Corden, 2007). Another example is the use of frames to support academic vocabulary and academic language in expository writing. In a sixth-grade social studies classroom, students were learning about the hieroglyphic system of writing developed by the ancient Egyptians. As she introduced a partner discussion, the teacher stated, “I want to hear these words in your conversation: *hieroglyphics*, *writing system*, and *civilization*.” Near the end of the same lesson, she asked students to write an exit slip summarizing their learning. She posted the following on the board:

*Please write a paragraph summary about what you learned today:*

The reason writing is so important to civilizations is \_\_\_\_\_. For example, the ancient Egyptians \_\_\_\_\_. This reminds me of \_\_\_\_\_.

**Prompting for Reflective Knowledge.** The last broad category of prompts are those that cause students to draw on their metacognitive awareness—to recognize when and how they are learning, as well as when learning breaks down. Anderson (2002) stated that students must be encouraged to move purposefully from cognition to metacognition. He offered four questions that encourage them to do so:

1. What am I trying to accomplish?
2. What strategies am I using?

**Figure 2**  
**A Student How-To Checklist for Writing a Manual**

- ☐ I described the audience (who will need this manual?).
- ☐ I have included a list of all materials needed.
- ☐ I have described the rules that the reader needs to know.
- ☐ I told the reader the mistakes to avoid.
- ☐ My steps are in order and numbered.
- ☐ Each step includes directions.
- ☐ Each step includes a labeled illustration.
- ☐ I have a Troubleshooting section for common problems.

Here’s what I need to do next: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. How well am I using the strategies?
4. What else could I do? (§ 12)

Younger students have more difficulty with formal metacognition, as it is fostered in part through an emerging ability to recognize patterns within themselves as they develop a greater capacity to exercise executive control for making decisions. However, the need to establish reflective thinking occurs from the beginning of the schooling years. It was common for primary teachers in this study to use reflective prompts during guided reading, such as “Does that make sense to you?” or “How would you say that?” when a child stumbled on a word. At times, the teachers offered other reflective prompts like “What can you do to help yourself?” in an attempt to cause the student to consider problem-solving strategies at his or her disposal.

### Cueing Students' Attention

Another instructional move that supports understanding involves shifts of learner attention. These differ from prompts in that they are more directly related to what the student is or is not noticing, rather than focused on the cognitive or metacognitive processes that the student needs to use. By using cues, the teacher diverts the learner's attention to a source of information that will help the student solve a problem or highlight an error or misunderstanding. There were a number of cues that teachers used, including visual, verbal, gestural, physical, and environmental. Regardless of the mode, cues provide the learner with additional information about what to notice.

**Visual Cues.** Visual cues, such as illustrations, photographs, blinking icons, strategic use of color, bold words, graphs, charts, and diagrams, are very common in both print and electronic texts. What these cues have in common is their graphic nature. Often, students simply miss the visual information, and cueing them to that information results in understanding. The teachers in this study used the following visual cues to scaffold their students' understanding. Although some of these are phrased as questions, the teachers are not checking for understanding but rather diverting the student's attention visually.

- “Did you see the bear on this page? Take a look at what he's holding. That will help you make an inference.”

- “Who's in the background of this picture? Why?”
- “The information in the chart might help you. Take a look again.”
- “Take a minute to review the pictures you've seen so far. How do you think the story will end?”
- “See how they made this look like a button? They want you to click that for the answer.”
- “Based on the way the artist drew this character, are you sure he's happy about this?”
- “When you get to a heading, what does that remind you to do?”

**Verbal Cues.** Although all teachers use their voices to provide information and instructions to students, the use of verbal cues provide students with hints or clues about what to pay attention to. The teachers in this study used verbal cues to direct students' attention to specific aspects of the text that they were missing. As such, the verbal cues included pauses and intonation to emphasize a point. The teachers also used verbal cues to add emphasis to their directions, especially when highlighting an error to avoid. The following are samples of the verbal cues from the teachers in this study:

- “Danger! This is a tricky word. Pay attention to all of the parts.”
- “This is really important...ready?”
- “You said ‘tooked.’ Does that sound right?”
- “Listen carefully to this step.”
- “Are you *sure* that's the right word?”
- “Some spiders have eight legs *or* all spiders have eight legs?”

**Gestural Cues.** These cues involve the teacher moving his or her body to focus students' attention. As such, they are a form of nonverbal communication that teachers use to emphasize their point. Often, gestural cues are combined with other cues, and sometimes prompts, for added effect. For example, several teachers we observed used comprehension process motions (Block, Parris, & Whiteley, 2008), which pairs a physical movement with a cognitive strategy, such as finding the main idea or making a prediction. Block and her colleagues stated that CPMs work because they “make abstract, metacognitive aspects of comprehension processes visible, understandable,



and accessible to young readers” (p. 469). In a typical case, the teacher wanted to clarify a word. As she did so, using context clues, she used a hand motion, going from closed hands with her thumbs up to open hands with splayed fingers.

Other teachers used gestural cues more generically. For example, in a fourth-grade classroom, the teacher pointed to information on a language chart without saying anything. The student reread the chart and was able to add to the discussion that he was having with his group. A first-grade teacher used her hands in a chopping motion when reminding a student to chunk words as she sounded them out. A sixth-grade teacher motioned larger or bigger by starting with her hands close together and moving them apart. As she did so, the student started talking again and expanded on his ideas for responding to the writing prompt.

**Physical Cues.** Teachers in this study used touch to direct their students’ attention. The range of physical prompts included a touch to the hand to encourage the student to keep reading, the repositioning of a student’s fingers on a pencil, and a touch to the shoulder to divert the student’s gaze to the left. In each case, the physical cue was enough to refocus the student and allow learning to continue.

**Environmental Cues.** The final type of cue that we noticed in our observations was environmental. Such cues were often paired with verbal and gestural cues but were unique in their use. The most common category of environmental cues was the print-rich environment that we observed in every classroom. There were word walls in every room, and students referred to them as they wrote. Posted on the walls were sentence frames that students used in their conversations. For example, in a second-grade classroom, students were practicing with sentence frames related to the vocabulary work. They chose one of the frames to use when talking with a partner: “I have never heard the word \_\_\_\_\_. I have heard the word \_\_\_\_\_, but I am not sure what it means. I know the word \_\_\_\_\_. Here is an example of a sentence: \_\_\_\_\_.”

As part of their comparing and contrasting lesson, a student in a first-grade class used the frame “Some spiders \_\_\_\_\_, but all spiders \_\_\_\_\_” to share what she found in her reading of two texts about spiders. In a third-grade classroom, the students understood

that they could leave their chairs during group work or independent work to use the word wall. One of the students wanted to write *beautiful*, but couldn’t remember how to spell it. With her paper in hand, she walked over to the environmental cue and found out.

## Providing Direct Explanations and Modeling

The final teacher behavior evident from the classroom observations involved direct explanations and teacher modeling. When questions revealed a lack of understanding, and prompts and cues did not resolve the issue, teachers provided specific information to students in the form of explanations and models. In the language of the gradual release of responsibility, these explanations required that the teacher reassume control of the thinking and demonstrate how the task could be completed or the strategy could be applied.

These direct explanations are consistent with the description that Thompson (2009) offered: “giving explanations, examples, or the answer; explaining the answer; referring to a previous discussion; posing a leading question for the student; and planning what the student should do next” (p. 427). For example, as part of a small-group lesson on writing, Mitch had spelled several words incorrectly. After prompting him and providing verbal and gestural cues to no avail, his teacher said, “There are two word wall words spelled incorrectly. I’ve underlined them. Can you go and get the correct spellings from the wall?”

In another classroom, five third-grade students who were reading *Voices in the Park* (Browne, 1998) were focused on integrating comprehension strategies. After checking for understanding, realizing that Nichole was relying on the illustrations to make her predictions rather than the words in the text, and prompting and cueing her to use the author’s words, the teacher moved to direct explanation: “Illustrations are *often* helpful for making predictions, but they don’t always give us a complete picture. Readers also have to use the *words* they read to make predictions. The words *scruffy mongrel* and *horrible thing* give me a different picture in my mind than what I see in the picture. Use those words to make your prediction.”

One of the ways that teachers in this study provided direct explanations included modeling. As part of modeling, “the teacher explicitly states which strategy is being taught and when it will be used. Then the

teacher applies a think-aloud model that includes the reasoning involved in using the strategy, thereby revealing his or her...processes” (Alfassi, 2004, p. 172). For example, when fifth-grade students were having difficulty with writing introductions, and prompts and cues did not help, the teacher took out a piece of paper and wrote a sample introduction, thinking aloud as she did so. Her think-aloud included conscious decisions about which introduction techniques to use and how to vary sentence starters and sentence length. As part of her modeling, the teacher said,

Given that my topic is comparing two fairy tales, I don't think that using humor as an introduction type is a good idea, because my reader might not take me seriously. I'm also thinking that a startling statistic won't work, as I don't know one about fairy tales. I do think that asking a question might work in this case, and I'm thinking that a quote might work. I think that I'll start my introduction by saying, 'Have you ever wondered why some of the same characters act differently in different stories?' Then, I can compare the two versions of Cinderella that I read.

## Discussion

The findings from this study suggest that teachers intentionally and consciously apply scaffolds for students to learn. The teachers in this study were fairly systematic, yet not scripted, in their approach to small-group guided instruction. They consistently led with questions to check for understanding and then prompted and cued students when errors and misconceptions arose. When the prompts and cues failed to resolve an error, teachers moved to direct explanations and modeling. Whereas prompts and cues were observed regularly during guided instruction, direct explanations were not observed as often. In only about 20% of the exchanges did teachers resort to direct explanations and modeling to ensure student understanding.

It is important to recognize that errors that are left uncorrected are unlikely to result in learning. Error identification must be carefully timed within the instructional cycle, because errors that are triggered too early may do more harm than good, as the teacher cannot lead a student through the thinking required to understand. Misconceptions or partial

## Take ACTION!

Guided instruction is ultimately about the instructional moves that the teacher makes. However, getting started can seem overwhelming unless you break it down into manageable phases.

**1.** Notice when you question, prompt, and cue—The first step is recognizing what you do and when as you provide scaffolds for students. Keep a tally of how often you use robust questions, cues, and prompts, so you can identify what you are doing and what needs more attention.

**2.** Make a plan to ask questions and identify likely prompts and

cues—Small-group guided instruction requires planning, but not the kind used for focus lessons. As you review the material to use in your lesson, develop several robust questions and compose cognitive and metacognitive prompts that you can use when understanding breaks down. Also, identify nearby environmental cues that might be needed during the lesson.

**3.** Identify time dedicated to guided instruction—Organize your instructional time so that guided instruction is possible. Learning continues when students are away from the teacher, and we have found that productive group work

tasks capitalize on peer learning opportunities while fostering continued consolidation of concepts and skills. This also creates time for you to meet with a teacher-directed small group for guided instruction.

**4.** Record one of your lessons for later analysis—Use a video camera to capture your guided instruction in action and view it later with a colleague to gain insight into the instructional moves that you use. Recorded lessons also help you identify your use of scaffolds. When you can name it, you can notice it—and when you can notice it, you can teach it.

understandings can be corrected through the use of prompts, cues, and at times direct explanations and modeling, when the teacher has the time to do so. The gradual release of responsibility model provides a framework for teachers to facilitate exactly this process. During the shared responsibility phase, teachers have the time to deploy instructional scaffolds, such as prompts and cues.

The classification system that resulted from the analysis of teacher moves in this study might be helpful as teachers consider what they can say or do to facilitate learner development. Although we did not consider scaffolds used during whole-class or individual instruction, the types of questions, prompts, and cues identified in this study could be used to validate and extend teacher practices during small-group instruction, which is considered critical for student achievement (e.g., Ford & Opitz, 2008).

The use of these scaffolds represents the intersection of the art and the science of teaching. Perhaps this is why small-group guided instruction is often identified as the most complex type of teaching. Novice teachers tend to focus more on the management of the lesson, such as gaining and maintaining attention. Even among more experienced teachers, a traditional transmission model anchored by the teacher telling students what they should know reduces the variable of student interpretation of that content. Guided instruction is more than simply a teacher with a small group. Without these scaffolds, passive learning experiences abound. This has implications for teacher educators and literacy coaches who work with reading teachers in refining their guided instructional practice.

Teachers who are truly talented at offering guided instruction seem to have internalized instructional moves that foster learning. This proves to be problematic for less skilled teachers who are therefore not able to incorporate these sophisticated practices into their own teaching (Lesley, Hamman, Olivarez, Button, & Griffith, 2009). The intent of this study was to make these teacher moves transparent in order to introduce a common vocabulary about the types of scaffolds that teachers can offer students to ensure success.

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- "Decisions, Decisions: Responding to Primary Students During Guided Reading" by Robert M. Schwartz, *The Reading Teacher*, February 2005
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